It Was 50 Years Ago Today: Reading the Beatles as a Challenge to Discourses of Hegemonic Masculinity

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Abstract

This paper explores the notion of the Beatles as a text through which to explore representations of hegemonic masculinity in "the sixties". It will argue that the Beatles produced an anti-hegemonic masculine discourse through a number of aspects of their work, challenging ideas about men and masculinities prevalent at the time of their existence as a working group and beyond. Rooted in the literature on men and masculinities the paper draws together a number of authors' work and presents ideas from the author's own work, using discourse analysis of the Beatles' live action films, based on a framework suggested by Foucault, Van Dijk, Hall, and McKee. An exploration of the ways in which the Beatles challenged and subverted traditional ideas about masculinity and the way in which their global fame provided a vehicle for representations of alternative versions of masculinity is the basis of the resultant discussion.

Keywords

The Beatles, masculinities, subversive, feminized, global

It is Christmas in the year 2010. Giant posters containing images of four men have sprung up in towns and cities. The posters announce that the mens' work is now available on I-Tunes. They are The Beatles. Forty years after their break-up they are still four of the most famous men and recognisable images on the planet. This paper argues that The Beatles, as arguably the most globally recognised male phenomenon of the period known as "the sixties", produced an anti-hegemonic masculine discourse through much of their work. Set in the context of the literature on men and masculinities, the paper examines The Beatles as a text and provides a number of examples of the ways in which they are important as men, at a particular historical moment, in providing an alternative version of masculinity and how a subversive discourse operates throughout much of their work.

MEN AND MASCULINITIES

Hearn (2004) and Kimmel, Hearn, and Connell (2004) have provided a comprehensive guide to the development of gendered work on men, what Collinson and Hearn (1994: 2) referred to a "naming men as men". This idea, originally advanced by Hanmer (1990), referred to the way in which excavation around how masculinity operates within wider society took place.

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The multi-disciplinary nature of this work often transgresses traditional academic venues (King and Watson 2001) and the study of men in the arts generally, and in popular music in particular, has developed as an emergent area of study in its own right (Hearn 2003; Hearn 2004).

Much of this work has focused on the ways in which men in popular music, particularly through their representation in the mass media, have either colluded with or provided a challenge to dominant versions of masculinity at work in Western society in particular.

The concepts of hegemonic masculinity (Connell 1983; Carrigan, Connell, and Lee 1985) draw on Gramsci's (1971) work and claim that dominant conceptualisations of masculinity are reproduced through key institutions, e.g., the education system, the mass media, and that other "versions" of masculinity, including young, homosexual, or effeminate men became subordinate to the dominant model. It is explicitly heterosexual (Butler 1990) and dominance is reproduced through groupings of powerful men (Carrigan et al. 1985). The notion of contested power (Gramsci 1971; Foucault 1980) is also central to the concept. Connell (1995) argues, however, that some men live in some tension with hegemonic masculinity and advance the idea of resistance to the dominant form.

Hearn (2003: 145) has acknowledged a change in writing on men and masculinities with an increasing emphasis on the role of representation of masculinities: "If one is interested in social change, in men and gender relations, it is necessary to attend to changing images of men which appear to have shifted considerably in recent decades".

Representation of masculinity and the way in which discourses of masculinity operate within the mass media has, therefore, become a central field of study for those involved in the critical studies of men. Drawing on works by Hall (1997), Gramsci (1971), and Foucault (1972; 1980; 1984), this paper will examine discourses of masculinity at work in the live action films of The Beatles.

A number of authors have written on the subject of the masculine and masculinist (Brittan 1989) nature of the music scene (Frith and McRobbie 1990; Cohen 1997; Whiteley 1997; Brocken 2000) with clearly defined gender roles while Marwick (1998), Sandbrook (2005; 2006), and others have documented the social changes of "the sixties" and the rise in the importance of popular culture in this period as an influence on social change. There is a particular emphasis in this work on the role of popular music in general, and The Beatles in particular, as being key to this in terms of high-profile and an increased visual representation due to the rise in popularity of TV in the home and the resurgence of the British film industry in this period (Sandbrook 2006). There is also a well-documented debate about the importance of the arts in general as a key influence of the social changes of "the sixties" (Shulman 1973; Martin 1981; Moore-Gilbert and Seed 1992). MacDonald (1994) presents a convincing explanation around The Beatles' symbiotic relationship with "the sixties" while elsewhere (King 2013) the author has documented the ways in which they became synonymous with resistance and challenge to a particular set of values (often conceptualised as "the establishment") (Sandbrook 2005; Sandbrook 2006) and to what had previously seen to be intransient rules about male identity and masculinity. These include an ever changing and increasingly feminized (Cohan 1993; Bruzzi 1997) appearance, their juxtaposition to masculinist (Brittan 1989) male characters (particularly in their films), queer codes (Shillinglaw 1999) and a child-like playfulness at work in their films, their status as men of ideas (Inglis 2000), which went beyond expectations of the "normal" pop-star role, and their relationship to their female fans. This will also be further explored later in the paper.

WHY THE BEATLES: A RATIONALE

Why the Beatles? For many, including MacDonald

(1994: 1), they are an aspect of British cultural history whose superiority and peerlessness need no debate: "Agreement on them is all but universal: They were far and away the best ever pop group and their music enriched the life of millions".

It is over fifty years since *She Loves You*, a record which has come to encompass the essence of the Beatles' early recording period in terms of style and musical substance, topped the UK charts at the height of Beatlemania. The Beatles remain as famous as ever and the words of press officer Derek Taylor, announcing their break-up in 1970, still seem to ring true: "The Beatles are not a pop group, they are an abstraction, a repository for many things" (Sandbrook 2006: 724). With record sales topping half a billion (including 17 UK and 20 US number ones) their iconic images continue to fill TV screens whenever the 1960s is mentioned; frozen in time stepping down from their plane at JFK in 1964, cuddly mop-tops surrounded by screaming fans, cool and groovy in their mid "60s" roll neck and shades incarnation, resplendent and moustachioed in Sgt Pepper costumes, hirsute on the Apple roof top in 1969.

Two are dead and two are living but their fame as The Beatles seem undimmed and they continue to make front page news in the early part of the twenty-first century. Their existence as a recording group only lasted for an eight year period, yet the texts that remain to document the global phenomenon that were The Beatles; including books and articles, both popular and academic, music, films, magazines, and the "official" history now available in the *Beatles Anthology* book (2000) and accompanying DVD (2003), provide evidence of an extraordinary male cultural phenomenon of the 1960s or, indeed, of the twentieth century.

FLUIDITY OF GENDER

Their representation of a version of masculinity that was resistant to the norm, their ability to be both ordinary yet extraordinary men and their playing with gender roles, through visual appearance, is a key component of The Beatles' phenomenon (Mäkelä 2004) as is their retrospective characterization as four different aspects of masculinity; the narcissistic Paul "with his baby eyes and baby face" (McKinney 2003: 323), the acerbic and intellectual Lennon (Goldman 1988), George as spiritual and inward looking (MacDonald 2003) and Ringo, the ordinary one (Melly 1970; Stark 2005).

Many commentators have commented on The Beatles' challenge to traditional sex and gender roles. Ehrenreich, Hess, and Jacobs (1992: 535) describe the Beatles' appeal to early 1960s' America as being centered on their representations of gender fluidity, claiming "… the group mocked the distinctions that bifurcated the American landscape into 'his' and 'hers'". Conversely a study of the causes of Beatlemania by A. J. W. Taylor concluded that the Beatles' masculine image was part of their appeal to young girls (Taylor 1968). Stark (2005) argues that it is their lack of connection to the groin-centered rock that came before (1950s' Elvis) and afterwards (1970s' heavy metal) and a connection to their female fans that provides a challenge to the usual masculine discourses at work in the music industry (Cohen 1997). Bannister (2000: 173) states that "The Beatles eschewed an aggressive, individualistic masculine mode of performance" and this is supported by a statement from John Lennon illustrating that they made a deliberate decision to take up a different position: "The Beatles didn't move like Elvis, that was our policy, because we found it stupid and bullshit" (Wenner 1971: 34). Ehrenreich et al. (1992) see Beatlemania as having the characteristics of a social movement centered on young women and girls and argue that it marked the beginning of a sexual revolution for young women. "… It gave young White women, in particular, a collective identity, space in which to lose control and assess their sexuality…" (Ehrenreich et al. 1992: 532)

Their female audience made a connection to them as fans, forming themselves into a fan club on a global scale (Mäkelä 2004; Stark 2005). There were, then, a number of other ways in which they related to the female audience which contribute to this idea of gender fluidity. Stark (2005: 133) sees them as "more feminine in their group dynamic" due to their lack of a macho-style leader and Lennon and McCartney's collaborative writing style, particularly in the early stages. A number of their early songs, are written from a female point of view (Whitley 2000; Stark 2005) with lyrics that suggest vulnerability and an indication that they felt the same way as the fans (Stark 2005). Many of the songs on their first album can be interpreted this way. Their refusal to change the lyrics to the song *Boys* (1963) for example, a song originally recorded by an American female group (Bannister 2000), makes it sound as if it is a man signing to and about other men. An affinity for and identification with American female vocal groups can also be seen as adding to their early non-macho persona (Bannister 2000). In *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) Lennon sings the opening lines "If I fell in love with you would you promise to be true" directly to Ringo, one of the many "queer" moments in this text (Shillinglaw 1999). *She Loves You* (1963) has an unusual (for the time) third-person lyric, which is essentially a dialogue between two men discussing a relationship, something which would have been seen as much more of a female activity. "Apologise to her" goes the caring refrain. This is a long way from groin-centred rock (Stark 2005). Bannister (2000) also notes that some of Lennon's early compositions, for example, *No Reply* (1964) and *Ticket to Ride* (1965) are written from the perspective of abandonment, what he claims is a feminized position, influenced by the work of Roy Orbison.

Mäkelä (2004: 65) claims that pop stars "ought to be situated in a continuing and shifting cultural debate about gender and sexuality" and that, in the case of The Beatles, this was made possible by their position in McLuhan's global village (McLuhan 1964). Savage (1991: 161) sees them as a challenge to the "stud/passive boys love cliché" and reiterates Lennon's position as resistant to the hegemonic masculinity at work in pop music. He cites his resistance to the wearing of the suit (The Beatles 2000) and his minor rebellion (top button undone, tie loose), as evidence of this. Lennon was also resistant to wearing his glasses (until his mid-1960s' self reinvention) and uncertain about the mop top hairstyle. Mäkelä (2004: 76) sees playing with gender as "an essential part of the group" and this is particularly apparent in The Beatles' films, as is gay manager Brian Epstein's influence on the group's style and presentation. Ann Shillinglaw's (1999) "queer reading" of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) and *Help!* (1965) adds to this argument.

DISCUSSION

It is the intention here to briefly outline the ways in which The Beatles, as viewed in their four live action films—*A Hard Day's Night* (1964); *Help!* (1965); *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967); *Let It Be* (1970), present a challenge to hegemonic masculinity (Carrigan et al. 1985; Connell 1995; Hearn 2004).

Earlier discussion outlines the values associated with hegemonic masculinity and the link to consumer capitalism, Western societal norms and conformity. In all four films The Beatles are juxtaposed with and come into conflict with men who represent hegemonic masculinity. Quite often these are authority figures ranging from the "I fought the war for your sort" upper crust railway carriage gent in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), through the police inspector in *Help!* (1965), the military figures in *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) to the annoyed businessmen and police officers, threatening to make a rooftop arrest, in *Let It Be* (1970). One way in which this juxtaposition occurs is through the

contrasting physical appearance of The Beatles to the other men in the films. The smart, sober "manly" dress and hairstyles worn by the representatives of hegemony are contrasted with The Beatles' attire. Their suited and booted look in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) is accompanied by subversive detail (Hebdidge 1978; Bruzzi 1997) and narcissism (Neale 1993) akin to that discussed by Bruzzi (1997) in relation to Franco-American gangster movies. The pastel shades and soft fabrics of the pre-metrosexual *Help!* (1965) lead on to the countercultural and most challenging visual appearance in *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967), while *Let It Be* (1970) sees them in a multi-layered challenge to the attire of the businessmen in the street below, with subverted suits, pumps, granddad vests, and green loon pants, topped off by women's coats. Hair length, part of an initial media obsession with their "subversive" appearance (Stark 2005), moves from what the media defined as "long" in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) to Woodstock generation length, with long hair worn as a countercultural badge, what Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young referred to as "letting my freak flag fly" in *Almost Cut My Hair* (1970).

Their relationship to the masculinist world of work and consumerism is interesting. In *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), they are contained by work and offer resistance (comparisons can be made with the men in the UK Northern kitchen sink dramas of the late 1950s and early 1960s). In *Help!* (1965) they show signs of upward mobility, work reduces, they enter a multi-coloured travelogue and show signs of early metrosexuality (Simpson 2004) and consumerist traits which would re-emerge in the 1980s (Edwards 1997; Nixon 1997). *Magical Mystery Tour* (1967) sees them totally at play, lost in a child-like psychedelic world (Macdonald 2003), the coach trip narrative of the film representative of a working class respite from work. *Let It Be* (1970) sees them, once again, contained by work but with the indoor/outdoor binary (Petersen 1998) coming

into play in the final scene, a link to the breaking out discourses at work in *A Hard Day's Night* (1964). Again, resistance comes to the fore.

CONCLUSIONS

The 1960s can be seen as a period in which representations of alternative versions of masculinity, those which challenged the hegemonic, became highly visible and widely available due to developments in technology and media (Moore-Gilbert and Seed 1992).

The emergence of TV as a central focal point of the domestic environment in the 1950s in the USA and the 1960s in the UK (Moore-Gilbert and Seed 1992) and Marshall McLuhan's (1964) notion of the global village, meant that The Beatles fame came at a time when the moving image became more accessible to a global audience of millions, and this, in turn, became a key factor in their worldwide fame. The first US TV appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show to an estimated audience of 73 million in 1964 or their appearance as Britain's representatives on *Our World* (1967), the first global satellite broadcast are but two illustrations of this. While alternative versions of masculinity are present in pre-1960s texts they are hard to find within cultural texts accessed by the masses.

It is also in this period that scholars began to examine the relationship between representation, social change and identify the role of the arts in social change (King 2013).

"The Beatles" has been chosen as a text, and as producers of texts, through which to read this process. The discussion presented so far is built on the premise that "The Beatles" can be read as the representation of an alternative version of masculinity or a subversive masculine discourse; a version which presents work as something which is not necessary to be the key factor in the formation of masculine identity, one which values creativity and the intellectual above the

mundane and the physical, one which involves colour and an "outrageous" appearance as a contrast to smart sobriety, with long hair as a symbol of defiance. It is a version of masculinity, which values the child-like above the norms of adult society and values fun and exuberance over the serious, *A Hard Day's Night* (1964), for example, provides much juxtaposition of The Beatles' exuberance with the discourse of work that binds the film together.

To this list, "The Beatles" as a representation of a more feminized (Cohan 1993) pre-metrosexual (Simpson 2004) version of masculinity can be added, an early illustration of the way in which the consideration of masculinity (singular) evolved into discussions of masculinities (plural) (Brod 1987; Hearn 2004). This is a key aspect of their films. As the sixties progress their look becomes more feminized. The Beatles' engagement with the female and the "feminized" became part of their appeal, part of their representation of alternative masculinities, and, thus, the female/feminine became a positive rather than a negative concept within "The Beatles" as text. As one interviewee in the author's PhD study remarked, at the beginning of the film *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) they are "running like big daft girls", away from female fans rather than chasing after women. The dressed-by-Brian look of *A Hard Day's Night* (1964) combined with the queer codes at work in this film and *Help!* (1965) (Shillinglaw 1999) and their general "to-be-looked-at-ness" (Mulvey 1975: 18), at work in all of the films, add weight to the arguments about alternative versions of masculinity. Authors such as Ehrenreich et al. (1992), Shillinglaw (1999), and Stark (2005) have emphasised that it is hard to understand, in retrospect, just how shocking and subversive this actually seemed and what an impact it had on "establishment" values in the 1960s. From a twenty-first century perspective The Beatles as male cultural phenomenon remains a relatively untapped source of study in the field of men and masculinities.

This paper represents a recognition of this fact and argues that the production of an anti-hegemonic masculine discourse through their work is an important part of the social changes of the past fifty years.

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